
Cross-Cultural Considerations for the United States Security Cooperation in the Middle East

By

Henry “Hank” Kron, Major, USA
Defense Institute of Security Assistance Management

The former Commander of U.S. Central Command, General Tony Zinni provides a fascinating account of culturally based misunderstanding at senior levels in Tom Clancy’s book *Battle Ready*. General Zinni describes how in his initial experience in the Middle East, Secretary of Defense William Cohen left a senior meeting in the Arabian Gulf uncertain as to where his interlocutors stood. Secretary Cohen offered succinct explanations and crisp requests for endorsement of U.S. military objectives in the region. Frustrated by hearing anything but direct and clear responses to his agenda, General Zinni explains how he advised the Secretary of Defense that they actually had received endorsements of our objective in those meetings. Perplexed, Secretary Cohen said he did not hear any endorsements at all.¹ However, the culturally astute General Zinni pointed out the subtle meaning of a parting phrase offered to Secretary Cohen: “you must always know that we’re your friends”.² Vagueness had been used to deliberately avoid a clearly defined position which would have contained uncomfortable criticism. The operative implication was a positive reinforcement of the strategic relationship, thereby a green light without saying exactly so. Another example of the typical indirectness in the Middle East, but what was really meant was not readily understood - even by Secretary of Defense.

Despite the fact that English was the common language, cultural rather than linguistic interpretations defined the nature of the communication. From senior U.S. government officials on down to the array of U.S. forces deployed in the Arabian Gulf region implementing the entire spectrum of security cooperation activities, Americans grapple with the significant impacts of cultural differences in the Middle East.³ Typical examples of misunderstood communication in the Middle East are: the ever polite and positive responses to requests that really mean something else; avoidance of straightforward blunt criticism, seemingly irrational delays that belie a lack of consensus among decision makers; the reluctance of detailed long range planning, the inexplicable avoidance to commit to obvious requirements according to our needs assessments. These are a few examples of situations that frequently present themselves to Americans in the region. Despite our long and successful history of engagement in the region, many Americans continue to misunderstand the real meanings behind these foreign behaviors. The unique context of interpersonal communication in conducting security

1. General Anthony Zinni later on points out that Secretary Cohen committed himself to understanding the Middle Eastern culture and connecting to the people in the region. The incident recounted in *Battle Ready* happened early in Secretary Cohen’s tenure. Secretary Cohen became admired for spending time out there and learning the culture.

2. Tom Clancy, *Battle Ready with General Tony Zinni Ret.*, (Putnman, New York, 2004), pp. 308-309.

3. In this discussion, the term Middle East is defined as those peoples whose mother tongue is Arabic, and/or societies with Islamic traditions as the predominant basis of cultural values. While ethnically and somewhat culturally different, the Turks, Iranians, and Afghans are also included in this category. So, this definition of Middle East can extend well into both the EUCOM and well into CENTCOM Areas of Responsibility (AoR). For instance, in the CENTCOM AoR, the four countries that comprise the Central Asian States, despite their Turkic heritage and in the instance of Tajikistan - a Farsi lineage, have evolved into hybrid cultures combining the legacy of the Central Asian steppe tribes with recent Russian influences. The societies of the Indian subcontinent, despite their robust Islamic identities, possess unique cultures that incorporate the South-West Asian culture with British traditions. Maronite and Coptic Christians in the Levant and “Misir” (Egypt) whose mother tongue is Arabic will tend to exhibit mostly the same culturally based communication patterns as their Muslim brethren. Likewise Arabic speaking peoples across the Maghreb and sub-Saharan Africa will also generally share the same culturally based communication patterns as peoples in the Arabian peninsula and Mesopotamia.

cooperation activities presents opportunities for us to acquire improved skills in understanding the mentalities and meaning of our Middle Eastern partners. We need to constantly work to enhance our cross-cultural comprehension levels to more effectively interact with our foreign partners in the Middle East.

The United States Department of Defense professionals who engage with our Middle Eastern partners are generally well prepared to deal with the obvious cultural differences. U.S. service members and particularly those involved in implementing security cooperation activities in the Middle East receive effective “cultural awareness” training, but the scope and depth is primarily to avoid embarrassing social offenses. U.S. security cooperation implementors are sensitized to Islamic practices and traditional Middle East norms. The aim is to demonstrate our respect for fundamental values in the region so that we can establish credible relationships that support our mutual interests. American personnel in the region generally know about: inappropriate use of the left hand, are sensitive to avoid compromising situations among mixed genders, adjust well to the enhanced restrictions during Ramadan, and understand what’s going on when hearing the calls to prayer five times per day.

However, as highlighted in the passage from Tom Clancy’s , *Battle Ready*⁴, even the most senior U.S. officials can thoroughly misread the true meanings conveyed to us in English by our Middle Eastern friends and allies. Oftentimes subtle cues and hints go unrecognized while Americans engage with Middle Easterners. This is generally due to misunderstandings of culturally based assumptions. Our security cooperation personnel encounter many subtle and foreign forms of verbal and non-verbal communication that are misinterpreted and or unnoticed, resulting in lost opportunities to effectively engage. There are many types of situations where less than effective cross-cultural communication can directly and adversely affect expectations and impact the outcomes of security assistance activities. Moreover, in large part because of the intangible nature of this subject matter, well intended after action-reviews tend to overlook the impacts, the contributing causes, and the resulting lost opportunities. Cross-Cultural misunderstandings often contribute to misunderstood intentions, diluted explain actions, altered perceptions, and in many instances significantly impact mutual expectations and outcomes. Moreover, cultural misunderstandings and the impacts they can generate frequently occur as unrecognized factors - primarily on the American side. Given the importance of security cooperation in contributing towards our strategic objectives in the War on Terrorism, exploiting any and every opportunity to become more effective in understanding our partners in the Middle East becomes a top priority .

Once we have acknowledged that there are situations in the Middle East that present foreign and subtle forms of communication which we may misinterpret. We can then work to gain a deeper understanding and improve our cross-cultural comprehension level. To better understand why, to more reliably predict when, and to more effectively manage expectations requires an in-depth look into the motivations that drive behavior and the communication patterns that tend to emerge which reinforce those motivations. We can then observe the differences in cross-cultural communication in the Middle East and more effectively define the real meanings conveyed in communication.

In working to improve our knowledge, skills and abilities to better understand the various nuanced meanings in Middle Eastern cultural contexts, we first need to become more attuned to what is meant, rather than just what is said. In learning to read the meanings we first need to understand the basic motivations of the actions. Recognizing and appropriately interpreting the fundamental motivations which drive meanings depends on knowing about the core ethos of the culture. We will

4. Tom Clancy, *Battle Ready with General Tony Zinni Ret.*, (Putnman, New York, 2004).

address some of the key drivers of motivation and behaviors in the Middle East by peeling back the onion of religious imperatives, values, traditions, and attitudes. Then we will highlight pivotal behavior patterns that reinforce those values. We will then use a series of cross-cultural dialogues to exhibit how Americans and Middle Easterners use different mentalities to approach the same topics of discussion. Progress towards improved cross-cultural communications, requires factoring in new considerations while interpreting meaning in interpersonal engagements. And finally, we need to realize that it takes ongoing practice and experience to improve cross-cultural communication skills.

Cultural adjustment and gaining enhanced cross-cultural communication skills is a more elusive effort than we might initially consider. Effective cross-cultural engagement requires a focused and raised comprehension of foreign and nuanced communications, coupled with practical experience over time. Further, complicating matters, assessing effective cross-cultural communications is also a difficult effort. How was this particular “blend of circumstances” reached and what could have been are frustrating questions to address. Outcomes are more reliable measurements of effectiveness, but inter-personal relationships and cross-cultural communications defies hard evidence of effectiveness. This contributes to less emphasis on the intangible aspects of inter-personal relationships despite our recognition of the importance of those dynamics. We know it is important to drink tea and engage in casual conversation, but it is a chore for most Americans and many do not realize the depth and breadth of meanings in the information exchanged while “shooting the breeze”.

Confucius said “ All people are the same, it is only their habits that are different.” In a practical sense, cultural adjustment to different habits suggests adjustment not to culture but to behavior. Culture is an abstraction that can be appreciated intellectually, but behavior is the key manifestation of culture that we encounter, experience, and deal with⁵. Both verbal and non-verbal communication are important behaviors in comprehending the actual meaning conveyed in a given context. Really understanding key dimensions of what’s going on in a given situation by what is termed reading between the lines can be a vague, intangible, and uncertain effort - even within one’s own operating environment, let alone in a foreign context. Trying to detect the real meaning of what is being communicated often relies on unfamiliar cue words and phrases, as well as all sorts of body language. Further complicating this effort, defining the true meaning of a message can also be hinged upon what is not said, or how intensely something is said, and when something is said in a given context.

Much of this cross-cultural misunderstanding is due to reliance on expectations based on social conditioning. The familiar term “ethnocentrism” points to universal tendencies for people to evaluate foreign behavior by the standard of one’s own culture. We are conditioned from our social environment to expect and assume certain meanings in given situations. Our cultural upbringing provides us with a frame of reference that we unconsciously use to interpret situations. However, we recognize that foreign cultures produce, in some instances, vastly different habits and patterns of action to convey different meanings. The old proverb notwithstanding, we can put ourselves in someone else’s shoes, but it is still our own feet we feel.⁶ A useful way to identify and define the differences in Middle

5. Craig Storti, *The Art of Crossing Cultures*, Yarmouth, Main, 1989, p.14.

6. Ibid, p.51.

Eastern communication patterns is to also recognize American behavior patterns and the underlying American cultural basis for communicating and comprehending situations.⁷

American practitioners in the field can work to raise awareness of probable differences in meaning and over time understand the coded hints, the underlying, oblique, and indirect subtle meanings conveyed by Middle Easterners. However, we need to realize that there is no consistently applicable formula to discern meaning in every set of circumstances. There is no absolute explanation that can be applied to every situation. Each situation includes participants with individual traits and each situation carries a unique context that defines what meaning and responses are appropriate for the people engaged.

The cross-cultural dialogues in following paragraphs will illustrate and contrast the Middle Eastern and American “mentality”. The idea here is to identify some key culturally based assumptions in the Middle East that drives different behavior. Cross-cultural dialogues are useful tools to highlight how different cultural conditioning affects interpersonal behaviors. The dialogues show that culture affects meaning and that once aware of the motivations and subtleties, we can work to improve our understanding of actual intentions, and reduce the pitfalls of false expectations. The explanations of the dialogues contain generalizations. Cultural generalizations may be accurate about wider groups, but would never be wholly true of particular individuals. Individuals encountered in the Middle East will display a broad range of characteristics that may or may not conform to any extent to the typical generalizations. In particular, military officials in the Middle East generally represent an elite progressive class within their society. Most of the military officials in the Middle East who are specially selected to interact with Americans have either already served overseas or possess experience interacting with foreigners. As such, they tend to have adjusted their own cross-cultural communication skills to better interact with Americans. Consequently, the Middle Eastern official’s ways of communicating with Americans will invariably be different than the garden variety merchant in the bazaar. Nonetheless, a lifetime of cultural conditioning will continue to have a compelling drive upon the motivations and expressions that Middle Eastern officials will exhibit.

There is an underlying ethos - a shared core of assumptions about people and the world that Middle Easterners will continue to experience and express. It is these core culturally driven motivations and communication patterns that are key to understanding context and meaning. Highlighting the underlying Middle Eastern cultural ethos that motivates and determines behavior patterns provides us with a basis of explanation of the supporting behaviors.

Core Middle Eastern Ethos

- At the end of the day, God, not detailed planning determines outcomes (fate)
- Avoid shame - preserve the collective honor (group identity)

7. We develop our notions of how to behave and interpret situations from our upbringing. We internalize these behaviors and meanings to the point where they become unconscious and instinctual. What we know and understand is what we have taken in and has been reinforced from our experiences. But the world we observe and the behaviors we internalize are not exactly the same as Mohammed’s. In the U.S., parents teach their children: that it is good to be an individual; self reliance; say what you mean and mean what you say; where there is a will, there is a way; hard work can take you wherever you want to go; and that once you are grown up, you alone are responsible for your actions. In Mohammed’s world, kids learn to: identify themselves through the group; depend on others as they depend on you; avoid direct interpersonal confrontations; and that God’s will is paramount. These learned cultural attitudes are acquired over time primarily in the formative years. Most people can not even explain why they behave or think in certain ways. This is also part of the reason why we project our own norms onto people of other cultures. If we do not remember formally learning these ways, it must have been inborn and therefore universally human. Another reason we attribute our own norms to foreigners is that people we have encountered have consistently behaved according to our expectations so why interpret things any other way?

-
-
- Obligations to always remain courteous, polite, respectful, and hospitable
 - Requirements to protect the virtues of our women⁸
 - Preserve and enhance the stature of history and reputation - of family, clan, tribe, region, ethnicity, those like us [states are the newest link]

Some of the supporting behavior patterns are listed below.

- Exaggerated flattery is an expectation. Reduced quantities subtly signals criticism. Absence of any flattery silence is thunderously meaningful and devastating.
- Identity lies in membership of a social group. The group takes the credit, so the group gets the flattery, not the individual. Over doing individual flattery invites jealousies from others. Intentionally over-exaggerated flattery to an individual signals an intent to wish bad tidings upon them.
- Since my team (family, clan, tribe, neighborhood, region, sect, nation, country) is everything, respecting the hierarchy is vital, and inter-personal relationships are approached through cooperation, group support and preserving appearances. Embarrassing others openly, publicly, and directly by competition and slander is reserved for outsiders.
- Working the network. Raise and reduce stature - praise and criticize - via intermediaries and emissaries. Who is doing it (who they are in the hierarchy) signals how heavy the meaning is.
- Silence speaks volumes. The absence of what would otherwise be said can be thunderously meaningful. No comment - no joy - no shame.
- One always knows - knows how to do it, knows someone who can do it. Knowing things and knowing people demonstrates individual abilities and personal stature. Long diatribes about related topics can mean I really don't know about that subject, but look how much I do know about this - so you'll continue to respect me.
- Smiles and hospitable offerings mean little substantively. Strangers and foreigners must receive more. Familiar faces can gauge their standing by how much they receive relative to previous instances and others.
- The interpersonal relationship matters. Friendship sows trust, respect, and mutual obligations for support. Thus, the need to look each other straight in the eyes, smell one's breath and body odor, touch hands and arms - to connect viscerally. Middle Easterners have highly honed skills at reading and judging people.
- Middle Easterners carry the reputation of their entire group. So, who's selected to be there "who's who" signals "what's what". Someone with the reputation and clout needs to be there to have anything done. "Experts" with no clout means no importance. It is not unlike the axiom: "It is not what you know, but who you know . . ."

8. Our women can be understood in terms of priority and intensity by relationship in the various groups to which family reputation, obligations of protection, and kindredness is ascribed. Therefore, in concentric circles of decreasing priorities we can see Middle Eastern males feeling protective for females of: their immediate household, extended family, neighborhood, tribe, province, country, region, ethnicity, religion, and finally any woman in distress.

Conceptual Comparisons of American and Middle Eastern Cultural Attributes

American

Action oriented
Goal oriented
Direct and open
Disclosing
Optimistic
Individual orientation

Symmetrical Relationships

(age, status)
Do one thing at a time
Concentrate on the job
Stick to deadlines and schedules
Focused on the job
Reluctant to borrow or lend
Avoid crossing privacy boundaries
Accustomed to short term relationships

Middle Eastern

Interaction oriented
Being oriented
Indirect and tactful
Face saving
Fatalistic
Interdependent orientation⁹

Complimentary Relationships

(age/status)
Juggle many things at once
Distractions and interruptions ok
Time commitments are objectives
Focused on the people
Often and easily borrow and lend
Minimal privacy boundaries with family/friends/close associates
Tendency towards lifetime relationships¹⁰

The following situation based dialogues are intended to illustrate typical cultural differences and how Americans and Middle Easterners can approach the same situation from entirely different viewpoints. For some readers, the subtle cues and meanings conveyed by the Middle Easterners will be evident and stark. However, we need to remind ourselves that what may seem obvious to comprehend in an academic environment can be easily misread or missed altogether while engaging in a foreign and distracting set of circumstances on the ground.

Situation: Just Trying to Help -Versus- I Need A Straight Shooter Who'll Get It Done

Iron Mike: I saw the official in the customs office today.

Abdullah: Oh, good.

Iron Mike: He said you never spoke to him about releasing that U.S. Foreign Military Sales (FMS) equipment.

Abdullah: I'm very sorry, sir.

Iron Mike: In fact, he said he's never heard of you.

Abdullah: It is possible, sir.

9. Hasan Dindi, Maija Gazur, Wayne Gazur, Aysen Dindi, *Turkish Culture for Americans*, International Concepts, Boulder, Colorado, 1989, pp. V-VI.

10. Edard T. Hall and Mildred Reed Hall, *Understanding Cultural Differences*, Anchor Press Doubleday, 1977, p.15.

Iron Mike: But when I asked you if you knew him and if you could help, you said you could.

Abdullah: Oh, yes, sir.

Iron Mike: But it wasn't true. You don't know him and you didn't even talk to him.

Abdullah: Excuse me sir, but I was only trying to help.

For Iron Mike, Abdullah is not only ineffective, but may be considered a liar! He said he knew the customs official and he could help. Abdullah did not know the customs official - therefore he lied. However in his world, Abdullah is obliged to give his boss a positive response - whether or not he can actually deliver. Another Arab would understand that Abdullah's positive response should not be taken literally - that he actually knows the man in the customs office and is going to be able to do something. It is understood that he's willing to try to help either because it is his job and his superior has tasked him, or in another similar situation because a friend has asked for help. Abdullah figures that he may know somebody that knows the customs official and somebody can have some pull. Abdullah will use his network of friends to help! Abdullah also expects some time to get this networking done and if after some time, he can't then he expects his boss to realize that he wasn't able to do it and he should look for another alternative - without direct confrontation. Instead, Iron Mike directly confronts Abdullah with the failure and even implies he's a liar. It is a measure of Abdullah's good manners that he maintains his composure and respectfulness. If other Arabs had been witness to Iron Mike's confrontation revealing Abdullah's deficiencies, the shame factor would have a serious impact on Abdullah. It would be no surprise to other Arabs in that case, if Abdullah gradually withdrew his efforts and found a polite reason to find employment elsewhere. Iron Mike would have no clue as to why he lost a good man.¹¹

Situation: A Bird In the Hand - Versus - One Well Done or Two Half Baked

Mohammed: Sir, would you like to see the two new offices we've completed?

Iron Mike: Offices? I thought we agreed to build one office and, if there were any funds left over at the end of the fiscal year, we would buy equipment for the one office.

Mohammed: Yes, but there was enough money to build two offices at once.

Iron Mike: But, is there any money left over to equip the offices?

Mohammed: Unfortunately, no, sir.

Iron Mike: Then we can't use them!

Mohammed: Not presently, but isn't it good? We used all the money!

Iron Mike thinks Mohammed is cooking up something on the side or is irresponsible with government funds, or just plain irrational. Mohammed's view is completely different yet just as rational and dutiful as Iron Mike's. Mohammed wouldn't think to rely on left over money to remain available to fund office equipment. It is better to use up all the money at once while you have it available and then request additional money for the necessary equipment to complete the overall effort. Now you have two offices and the funding source is under pressure to equip at least one if not two. All this is based on operating assumptions of predictability and reliability of the system, the

11. Craig Storti, *Cross-Cultural Dislogues*, Intercultural Press, Yarmouth Maine, 1994, p. 112.

government, and even in reality in general. Iron Mike trust his system and government, and as an American has grown up with principles like: Make it happen, where there's a will there's a way, there's nothing we can't do . . . ! Government services are transparent, law abiding, and for the benefit of citizens regardless of who's involved. Mohammed has no such notions of accountability in government or predictability over outcomes in life. Fate determines everything and if you have it you use it or lose it.¹²

Situation: Feasibility - The Facts or the Man

Iron Mike: I think we should examine the feasibility study for the proposed Ministry building.

Nasser: I agree, sir. Perhaps we can begin by discussing who the director of the project will be.

Iron Mike: That will have to be decided, of course. But first we have to see if the project is doable.

Nasser: Yes, sir, that's exactly my point.

Iron Mike wants to examine the substance of the new project for a Ministry building to see if it is executable. Nasser is also interested in determining if the project is doable, but not by examining the facts contained in the feasibility study. He will know if it is really going to happen based on who's put in charge of the project. If someone of influence and authority is put in charge, then it means the Ministry takes the project seriously. If a relatively minor official with no clout is selected to run the project - no matter how expert he may be - it is a good bet the project will never get off the ground regardless of how well engineered the plans are.¹³

Situation: A Very Persuasive Decision Brief

Iron Mike: So, Hamad, how do you think the briefing was?

Hamad: Sir, Brigadier Ali was very impressed. Your presentation was clear, organized, and informative.

Iron Mike: Well we worked really hard to capture all the data - we focused on the relevant metrics.

Hamad: Yes, the briefing had a lot of information.

Iron Mike: Yes, but It is been awhile and no feedback or decision from Brigadier Ali.

Hamad: I think the Brigadier may have thought there was something missing, that you were not very involved or enthusiastic about the project.

Iron Mike: I don't know what else I could have done, the facts really speak for themselves in project.

For Iron Mike, the cold hard facts don't lie. You can't argue with the statistics. Stick to the numbers and we can't go wrong. Brigadier Ali appreciates facts too, but facts are not going to implement the project. This is Iron Mike's project and Brigadier Ali is thinking he certainly has his information in order, he's made a persuasive case on the

12. Ibid., p. 78

13. Ibid., p. 84.

merits of the facts. But who is Iron Mike. We can trust facts on paper. Brigadier Ali wants a warm and fuzzy about Iron Mike - that he's committed to complete the project as outlined. In addition to the facts, Brigadier Ali wants to see something of Iron Mike - the man - in his briefing, but Iron Mike didn't come out from behind his numbers. Instead of embarrassing Iron Mike by openly discussing his rational, Brigadier Ali would prefer to choose silence as a signal that he's not convinced to give the project to Iron Mike. If Iron Mike pressed for an answer, a polite yet seemingly oblique reason would be given by Brigadier Ali's intermediaries that would further confound Iron Mike.¹⁴

Situation: The Plan is Under Study

Iron Mike: Abdulsalam, what did you think of the new plan?

Abdulsalam: Seems very fine, but I'm still studying it, we need to be certain.

Iron Mike: Still studying it after three weeks? It is not that complicated!

Abdulsalam: There are one or two aspects that might be a problem.

Iron Mike: Oh, I know that, but we should put the plan into action and work the bugs out later.

Abdulsalam: Seriously?

Iron Mike is ready to adopt new concepts into action and make adjustments once implemented. Many other cultures are skeptical of new things, "There's nothing new under the sun." The presumption is what's worked is better than risking failure. When all the glitches are addressed in the plan, then Abdulsalam may be more inclined to initiate a trail run. Trial and error is not the preferred way to operate. Americans believe if you fall on your face, you get up. Many other cultures feel if you fall on your face, no one ever forgets the sight of you sprawled in the mud.¹⁵

Situation: Wait Here - Versus - I'll Do It Myself on the Way

Iron Mike: Khalid, I was wondering if my vehicle was ready from the service shop down the street yet?

Khalid: Yes, sir. The shop called and your car is ready.

Iron Mike: Great. I'll go pick it up.

Khalid: Oh, no sir! I'll send a driver to pick it up and bring it here for you.

Iron Mike: No need to pull someone out of the office for that. It is on my way anyway.

Khalid: Please, sir. You wait here and drink some tea. I'll have the car here right away.

Iron Mike is unaware of the image and status he carries around in this environment. The image of the American officer in charge walking down the street to the garage to talk with the mechanics to get his own car signals to those in this environment that his office is in disarray, his drivers and assistants are absent, and he has no clout to do anything about it. Not only does this reflect badly on Iron Mike in the eyes of the

14. Ibid., p. 121.

15 Ibid., p. 22..

locals, but all the locals working in his office would never live it down to others that they allowed such an indiscretion to happen.¹⁶

Situation: Performance Evaluation - Constructive Criticism

Iron Mike: Khalil, let's go over your semi-annual performance evaluation.

Khalil: Whatever you think, sir.

Iron Mike: As you know, you're performing well overall. There are just a few areas for improvement I'd like to discuss with you.

Khalil: I see.

Iron Mike: One is in writing, which isn't easy for you, is it?

Khalil: No, sir.

Iron Mike: And the other is in identifying training needs. Your staff could use more computer training.

Khalil: Yes.

Iron Mike: Anyway, it is all written here in the report. You can read it for yourself. Otherwise, no serious problems.

Khalil: I'm very sorry to disappoint you, sir.

The imperatives of honor and avoidance of shame means that criticism has to be handled very delicately in the Middle East. Oftentimes, a lack of overdone praise is sufficient to signal dissatisfaction. When unavoidable, criticism should be expressed with the utmost discretion and indirection. Iron Mike was actually pleased with Khalil's performance and said so - once, and closed with "otherwise no problems." An American would probably read that evaluation just for what Iron Mike meant. For Khalil, the brief understated praise coupled with a direct focus on spelling out the deficiencies meant his boss thought he's performing badly. Khalil naturally assumes that Iron Mike will bend over backwards to be sensitive about Khalil's sense of self image, honor, and reputation. If that was the best Iron Mike could do to praise him and if that represents the best face Iron Mike could put on the situation; then Khalil's read was things are bad for him there. If Iron Mike had quickly slipped the critique into a majority of the time highlighting Khalil's successes, then Khalil would have been able to stomach the criticism. Now, Iron Mike has no clue that Khalil's morale is shot after that performance evaluation. That terribly insensitive session will be the main family topic of discussion for a long time in Khalil's house. It would be no surprise to another Arab if soon enough Khalil's performance really drops off and he soon finds a new place to work. Khalil would offer a plausible and polite reason to find employment elsewhere yet would remain on the friendliest of terms. Iron Mike will still have no clue as to really why he lost such a good man.¹⁷

Situation: She's The Best Man For the Job

Iron Mike: Khalid, Even though the host nation senior leadership pledged to fully support our investigation, ever since I sent in Lieutenant Jane to investigate the incident, the host nation support has declined. Are they stonewalling because of gender?

16. Ibid., p. 64.

17. Ibid., p. 69..

Khalid: Sir, There are several female forensic officers in the military here.

Iron Mike: Well, Lieutenant Jane is the very best forensic expert we have. That should have signaled our priority on this.

Khalid: I'm sure everyone recognizes her technical expertise.

Although Iron Mike perceives a passive-aggressive reaction to assigning Lieutenant Jane to the case, he can't see any other reason than gender bias as the cause of host nation indifference to her. Iron Mike sent in the best expert he had to work the case. The host nation reaction doesn't make sense. Khalid understands that the lack of enthusiasm by the host nation to pursue the case is because an unknown officer of very young age showed up on the scene without Iron Mike's personal endorsement on the ground. Her expertise notwithstanding, her youth and lack of introduction by a trusted senior, signals a lack of priority in the eyes of the locals.

Situation: The "Inshallah"

Iron Mike: Mohammed, will you be here tomorrow to join us for dinner, and will you bring your friends too please?

Mohammed: Yes, - Inshallah!

Iron Mike: We'll expect to see you and your friends here for dinner tomorrow at 19:00.

Mohammed: Yes, Mike, Inshallah. Dinner with you and our friends. It will be our pleasure!

Iron Mike has heard of the real meaning of Inshallah - "if it is God will", it really means not likely to happen. So, Iron Mike will now invite another group for dinner because he doesn't expect Mohammed to show.

In Mohammed's context, Inshallah must be added - as reinforcement of his personal commitments. He said yes - twice, and confirmed yes is for dinner - with friends. Although he will do everything he can to attend, it is doubtful he would show up precisely at 19:00 sharp. Iron Mike is probably in for a surprise when Mohammed shows at 20:30 and Mike will have to awkwardly manage the situation as he had invited another competing group to the dinner. The meaning of "Inshallah" can range from a definite yes - as in a subordinate's response to a direct order from a superior, an uncertain maybe, and even to a polite deflection signaling no. The local environment, the context of the circumstances, and the people involved will all determine the appropriate usage.

Situation: Getting to Know You

Iron Mike: Hassan, now that we'll be working together as counterparts, I wanted to let you know about my background. I've got B.S. and M.S degrees in engineering, and have 18 years experience in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. I've completed several major projects of the type we're about to embark on together. How about you?

Hassan: Sir, my family is from a section of Baghdad- that you would probably not be familiar with. My uncle Nasser speaks excellent English and would like to meet you. Shall I arrange to have my Uncle Nasser meet you ?

Mike has no clue as to the meaning of Hassan's seemingly off target response. Mike will probably drive on and see how Hassan performs, but why couldn't Hassan just rattle off his credentials and experience and what does his family's location and his uncle have to do with it anyway? On the other hand, Hassan considers it very inappropriate to tout his own credentials directly to Mike. Hassan typically discusses his family's background

and most Arabs would instantly understand his reputation by his family name and his by his neighborhood . . . Hassan did realize that Mike wouldn't know his family's reputation by mentioning the city and neighborhood, so he then proceeded to set up a meeting for Mike with his uncle who would represent his family and act as an intermediary with Mike and openly brag about his nephew's impressive engineering credentials.

Situation: The Agenda

Iron Mike: Khalifa, I see what you mean, that's a very important point, That's what we need to focus on but . . .

Khalifa: Sir, now if I could explain some of the details.

Iron Mike: I wish you had brought this to my attention earlier in the meeting.

Khalifa: Excuse me, sir?

Iron Mike: I mean, this is something we need to look at together very closely. But, we've already extended our meeting.

Khalifa: Yes, of course, sir. But if you'll just bear with me a few moments.

Iron Mike: Let me ask my secretary to put you on my calendar for Friday.

Khalifa: Excuse me, sir?

Iron Mike: So we can continue then. .

Khalifa: You want me to come back again, on Friday?

Even though Iron Mike recognizes that they're getting somewhere, he's unwilling to further extend the meeting and prefers to keep things on track rather than upset the schedule. Schedules are man made, but once we have a schedule, for many of us A-Type hard chargers, it is the person, not the schedule that has to do the accommodating. To do otherwise means being unorganized and undisciplined. Khalifa is operating off of another set of assumptions. The time and schedules are meant to be a flexible framework to organize the day's activities. What can a few more minutes of their time be worth compared to resolving the issue.¹⁸

The following excerpts highlight how complex cross-cultural interactions can be and how others assume Americans are conditioned to respond.

Knowledge and a Little Luck!

Sometime in 1906 I was walking in the heat of the day through the Bazaars. As I passed an Arab Café, in no hostility to my straw hat but desiring to shine before his friends, a fellow called out in Arabic, "God curse your father, O Englishman." I was young then and quicker tempered, and could not refrain from answering in his own language that "I would also curse your father if he were in a position to inform me which of his mother's two and ninety admirers his father had been!" I heard footsteps behind me, and slightly picked up the pace, angry with myself for committing the sin Lord Cromer would not pardon - a row with the Egyptians. In a few seconds I felt a hand on each arm. "My brother," said the original humorist, "return and drink coffee and smoke with us. I did not think

18. *Ibid.*, p. 121.

that your worship knew Arabic, still less the correct Arabic abuse, and we would benefit further by your important thoughts.”

Ronald Storrs. “Orientations.”¹⁹

Those Americans, They’ll Follow The Rules - Even When There’s No Good Reason To!

Once we were out in a rural area in the middle of nowhere and saw an American come to a stop sign. Though he could see in both directions for miles and saw no traffic was coming, he still stopped!

Turkish Exchange Student In “There Is A Difference.”²⁰

Profiling the Yanks

MacDonald’s restaurants are probably a good reflection of the American character. They’re fast, efficient, they make money, and they’re clean. If they’re loud and crowded and if the food is wastefully wrapped, packaged, boxed, and bagged . . . let’s face it, that’s us Americans.

Andy Rooney “A Few Minutes With Andy Rooney”.²¹

Increasing effectiveness in cross-cultural communication involves becoming more attuned to what the real meaning is in a situation - what is meant versus what is said. We need to recognize our own American-centric assumptions and then deliberately adjust our interpretations to our acquired understandings of Middle Eastern motivations, cultural conditioning, assumptions, and supporting behaviors. The challenge is not only to become equipped to define the situation more appropriately - that is according to the locals’ viewpoint. We also need to increase our perceptiveness to recognize the brief and subtle cues while engaging in the substance of the agenda, and invariably while functioning within a broader and distracting environment. Discerning the significance of various behavior patterns can be like acquiring a new language. When we listen to someone speak a foreign language we tend to only hear those words that seem familiar, and the rest is noise. Similarly, in observing foreign behavior - including English spoken in a foreign context - we pick out those actions and the meaning of the spoken English and define what’s going on according to our own culturally based assumptions. All the rest, rich in meaning to everyone but us, is just random undifferentiated action and utterances. It is the same when we come across a word we don’t understand while reading. We guess at the meaning from the context. Further complicating this challenge is the Middle Eastern style of omission of input, or the deliberate timing or intensity of the input - all which impart a significance that is altogether absent in American forms of communication. We also need to be aware that there is not only behavior that we misinterpret because there’s no corresponding cultural meaning in the American context, but there is behavior and speech in the Middle East that we don’t even pick up on at all. There is, quite literally, more to a foreign culture than meets the eye. While we can’t always trust what we see, our observations remain the primary gauge to learn about a foreign culture. We simply have to be aware that some of what we see may only be in the eyes of the beholder!²²

In identifying Middle Eastern core cultural ethos, we gain an improved understanding of the common motivations of behavior. We can realize that Middle Eastern motives can be very different than American “mentalities”. People naturally assume that their interpretations of context and meaning

19. Craig Storti, *The Art of Crossing Cultures*, pp. 85-86..

20. Ibid., p. 112.

21. Ibid., p. 113.

22. Ibid., p. 81.

are common everywhere. Therefore, it is a common tendency for Americans to draw upon their own distinct American frames of reference to define meaning in cross-cultural situations - and likewise for the inexperienced Middle Easterner. The list of key Middle Eastern values and the highlights of various behaviors that tend to emerge in support of those values, provide a basis to examine the cross-cultural dialogues. Cross-cultural dialogues can be an effective tool to exhibit vastly different mentalities expressed in key yet nuanced and subtle communications. The explanations of the dialogues - from the viewpoints of the American and Middle Eastern participants - offer insights as a new frame of reference to define meaning in certain situations.

American service members conducting security cooperation activities with Middle Easterners need to remain mindful that we've acquired our own cultural conditioning over the course of our formative years into adulthood. We need to recognize that like learning a foreign language in adulthood, we gain proficiency but our newly gained knowledge, skills, and abilities to adjust to foreign contexts should be a continuous learning process. If approached as an ongoing effort to enhance our cross-cultural communication abilities, we can expect to increase our understandings of why, increase our ability to predict when, and thereby improve our management of important mutual expectations that emerge in the unique interactive and personally driven field of security cooperation activities.

References

1. Clancy, Tom. *Battle Ready with General Tony Zinni Ret*, (Putnam, New York, 2004), pp. 308-309.
2. Storti, Craig. *The Art of Crossing Cultures*, (Yarmouth, Maine, 1989), p. 14.
3. Ibid, p. 51
4. Hasan Dindi, Maija Gazur, Wayne Gazur, Aysen Dindi. *Turkish Culture For Americans*, (International Concepts, Boulder, Colorado, 1989), pp. V-VI.
5. Hall, Edward T. and Hall, Mildred Reed., *Understanding Cultural Differences*, (Anchor Press Doubleday, 1977), p. 15.
6. Storti, Craig. *Cross-Cultural Dialogues* (Intercultural Press, Yarmouth Maine, 1994), p. 112.

About the Author

Major Hank Kron has been the Director of Middle East Studies at DISAM since August 2004. In addition to presenting Middle East subjects to various courses offered at DISAM, he is an instructor in SAO Operations, International Military Training, and U.S. Defense Acquisition Policies and Procedures. He is a Middle East Foreign Area Officer with nineteen years of service. He served as a Political-Military Staff Officer at Central Command Headquarters. He has a M.A. in Near East Studies from Princeton, and a B.A. Summa Cum Laude from City University of New York in Political Science.